

# What Constitutes our Sense of Reality? Hannah Arendt's Critique of the Search for Epistemic Foundations<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The most common traditional epistemological problems arise from the uncertain nature of sense perception. According to typical skeptical argumentation, our knowledge-claims rely on a network of unjustified beliefs. In our natural, common sense attitude towards the world, we take for granted the truth of various beliefs, such as the fact that we are embodied beings who know various things about other people and the world around us by means of sense perception and reason for example. Skeptical arguments, such as Descartes' methodological skepticism, proceed by making hypothetical counter-claims to our most basic beliefs and demand that in order for there to be knowledge, these hypotheses must be proven to be false. If we cannot justify common sense beliefs, then how can we justify any knowledge at all? After all, knowledge is built on true, justified beliefs, or so the argument goes.

This kind of argumentation may seem quite intuitive and convincing. On the other hand, it is very difficult if not impossible to answer skepticism in its *own terms*

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because the justifications that the skeptic demands seem impossible to satisfy. The most radical skeptic demands a justification not only for the epistemic propositions that concern knowledge in the strong sense, but also for the doxastic judgments that concern our most basic framework of beliefs, such as the belief that there will be a tomorrow or that external objects do not cease to exist when not perceived. The problem with epistemological foundationalism is that it attempts to answer skepticism in its own terms by trying to prove that there are indeed fundamental, indubitable beliefs that even skepticism cannot refuse to accept if it is to remain the serious, philosophical doctrine it claims to be.

In this article, I will present Hannah Arendt's twofold critique of epistemological foundationalism.<sup>2</sup> I argue that there is an interesting philosophical issue at hand in the last sections of the *Human Condition* (1958) that connects this work to the first book of *The Life of the Mind* (1978). Namely, in these texts Arendt presents a critical reading of both traditional rationalist- and empiricist foundationalism and offers her own praxis-oriented philosophy as an alternative. However, due to her reputation as a political theorist, Arendt's remarks on epistemology have received only marginal attention. Thus, Arendt's insightful critique against what John Dewey calls "the quest for certainty" has remained undiscovered. In addition, Arendt's powerful critique of political fundamentalism and ideology becomes merely a stance among other political attitudes if one does not understand that her critique is backed up by a sophisticated philosophical diagnosis of the logic of ideology.<sup>3</sup>

I will at first outline Arendt's conception of "dismantling" which aims at locating and disclosing problematic metaphysical conceptions that are due to a careless use of language and a confusion regarding the difference between various types of knowledge. I then move on to examine Arendt's critique of empiricist and rationalist foundationalism. I show that Arendt's critique of the grounding of knowledge in experience culminates in what she calls "the mathematization of nature," which means that the whole of nature, including the human being, is understood as an object for applied mathematics, that is, as a topic for quantitative and qualitative analysis. I will then outline Arendt's critique of rationalist foundationalism and show that her main concern with this doctrine is its neglect of language. Finally, I end by bringing into light Arendt's own conception according to which language, in the form of speech and action, functions as the starting point of inquiry.

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2 Although Arendt herself does not use the term "epistemological foundationalism," I take this term to be fruitful for describing her general critique of philosophical and political programs that aim to locate absolute foundations or reach a level of absolute certainty.

3 One example of such a theoretical analysis is the chapter "Ideology and Terror" that Arendt added to the 1968 edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

## Kant and the “Crisis” in Philosophy

In the first book of *The Life of the Mind*, called *Thinking*, Arendt begins her philosophical inquiry with a question concerning “the end of philosophy,” in other words, the relationship between the Western philosophical tradition and the present time. Arendt reflects on famous philosophical statements such as the claim that God is dead, that reason is in a crisis, and finally the claim that Western philosophy and history have reached their final state in the self-understanding of Absolute Spirit. Arendt remarks that actually the context of the discussion of “the end of philosophy” was Immanuel Kant’s radical question concerning the possibility of any future metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> She points out that the philosophical shock that Kant gave to Western philosophy was due to the fact that he left open the possibility that the capacity of reason is limited.

Arendt claims that this challenge for philosophy divided the philosophical tradition following Kant. Whereas Hegel’s and the German idealists’ answer to Kant was to liberate the faculty of speculative reason – through a turn to absolute idealism – in order to abolish the dichotomy between the subjective and objective fields of knowledge, philosophers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and Heidegger paused to think about the nature and meaning of Kant’s question for future philosophy. Arendt claims that it is here that the existentialist questions originate. That is, from what position and within what context are we able to ask philosophical questions and make philosophical statements in the first place?

Arendt reflects on her own philosophical thinking in relation to Kant’s question and clarifies her position: “I have clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we have known them from Greek until today.”<sup>5</sup> By these ranks Arendt refers to thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Jaspers. She claims that despite the eventual crisis of reason, we have not lost our ability to think philosophically. Arendt remarks that what has happened is that the way philosophical questions have been asked, and the context in which these questions have been framed have become implausible.<sup>6</sup> She further stresses the importance of interpretation and narration as constitutive of present philosophy. An original beginning (*arche*) cannot be located within history, since history consists of several

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4 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1: *Thinking*. New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1981(1978), 15–16.

5 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 212.

6 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 10–12.

different interpretations based on contingent historical practices and events.<sup>7</sup> One of the implausible philosophical doctrines that Arendt locates in the history of metaphysics is the leap from epistemology to ontology, of which the rational proof or demonstration of God's existence is only one famous example. In her early essay "What is Existential philosophy?" (1945) Arendt already writes:

Kant's refutation of the ontological proof of God's existence destroyed any rational belief in God based on the proposition that anything accessible to reason had to exist [...]. This so-called disappearance of God from the world, the knowledge that we cannot rationally prove the existence of God, had as serious implications for concepts of ancient philosophy as it had for the Christian religion. In a godless world, man in his "abandonment" or his "individual autonomy" is accessible to *interpretation*. For every modern philosopher – and not just for Nietzsche – this interpretation becomes the touchstone for his philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

The refutation of the ontological proof had serious consequences for any philosophical attempts to construct a system of first philosophy. Although Descartes emphasized the finitude of the human intellect, the rational proof of God's existence was the cornerstone that guaranteed the coherence of his metaphysical system. Even Kant himself finally needed God for grounding his moral philosophy. The echoes of a neo-Platonic conception of God still appeared as a historicized *Geist* in German idealism. What was common to these views was that they all attempted to ground knowledge on absolute foundations. In order to avoid infinite regress in the hierarchical structure of beliefs, the absolutely final ground was commonly conceived as an omnipotent God.<sup>9</sup>

According to Arendt, the philosophical rupture and crisis that Kant caused for the history of Western metaphysics did not kill thinking and philosophy. Instead it opened up a space for genuine self-critique and self-understanding.<sup>10</sup> Arendt emphasizes that this space in the tradition of Western philosophy is something that every philosophical generation should cherish in order to keep critical thinking and philosophical dialogue alive.<sup>11</sup> Arendt reflects on Kant's achievement in the following passage:

The [ancient] unity of thought and Being presupposed the pre-established coincidence of *essentia* and *existentia*; that is, everything thinkable also existed, and everything

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7 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998(1958), 273; Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future – Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Viking Press, 1993(1961), 42–43.

8 Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy?" In Jerome Kohn (ed.), *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1994(1945), 169.

9 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 282.

10 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 11–12.

11 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 212.

extant, because it was knowable, also had to be rational. Kant [...] shattered that unity. Kant robbed man of the ancient security in Being by revealing the antinomy inherent in the structure of reason; and by his analysis of synthetic propositions, he proved that by any proposition that makes a statement about reality, we reach beyond the concept (*the essentia*) of any given thing.<sup>12</sup>

The result of this shattering of the unity of thought and Being has according to Arendt severe consequences for philosophy, since Kant focuses his philosophy especially on our conception of concepts and intuitions, in other words on the relation between language, thought, and the world. According to Arendt, the dichotomies between “mind” and “body” or the “real world” and “the apparent world” are not ontological distinctions, but conceptual distinctions, rooted in our use of language. When we realize this, we can see the superficiality of many philosophical dichotomies. Thus, Arendt’s dismantling of Western metaphysics consists in exposing philosophical trains of thought and arguments that have become so common that they have become a part of our everyday use of language. She sees efforts of this type of dismantling already in Marx’s, Kierkegaard’s, and Nietzsche’s writings and thus states:

In Marx, as in the case of great authors of the last century, a seemingly playful, challenging and paradoxical mood conceals the perplexity of having to deal with new phenomena in terms of an old tradition of thought outside of whose conceptual framework no thinking seems possible at all. It is as though Marx, not unlike Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, tried desperately to think against the tradition while using its conceptual tools.<sup>13</sup>

In order to be able to localize and expose metaphysical fallacies, Arendt thus takes her clue from language. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, Arendt claims in her later writings that:

“The results of philosophy are the uncovering...of bumps that the intellect has got by running its head up against the limits of language.” These *bumps* are what we have here called “metaphysical fallacies”; they are what “makes us see the value of the discovery.” Or: “Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” (*wenn die Sprache feiert*). [...] Or: “Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by language.” The trouble is of course that this battle can be refought only by language.<sup>14</sup>

Arendt’s aim is to show how our use of language and its concepts affects our philosophical thinking. In order to be able to show this, Arendt uses both grammatical and etymological analyses of the use of concepts. However, she does not promote philosophical quietism. The so called metaphysical fallacies must

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12 Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy,” 168.

13 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 25.

14 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 115.

not be denied or solved but instead located and revealed.<sup>15</sup> In this way Arendt's philosophical project consists in a form of a philosophical "deconstruction."<sup>16</sup> The deconstructionist method of dismantling focuses on the implicit presuppositions that philosophers inevitably make in their thinking. By following the philosophical argumentation of a chosen philosopher or a chosen philosophical doctrine to its limits, Arendt claims to be able to reveal strands of thought that are not visible to the author himself. This opens up a hermeneutical space for a critical dialogue between the author and the reader.

None of the systems, none of the doctrines transmitted to us by the great thinkers may be convincing or even plausible to modern readers; but none of them, I shall try to argue here, is arbitrary and none can be dismissed as sheer nonsense. On the contrary, the metaphysical fallacies contain the only clues we have to what thinking means to those who engage in it – something of great importance today and about which, oddly enough, there exist few direct utterances.<sup>17</sup>

One of the main metaphysical doctrines that Arendt aims at dismantling is the task of grounding knowledge on certain, bedrock foundations. It is to this epistemological problem that I will turn to next.

## **Empiricist Foundationalism and the Mathematization of Nature**

Arendt claims that something crucial happened with the birth of modern natural sciences. The ideal for the new science was the valuing and measuring of phenomena from an objective and neutral viewpoint.<sup>18</sup> Arendt states that although empiricism advocates itself as being able to ground knowledge in experience, it is still dependent on the mathematical, natural-scientific methods in order to be able to carry out and verify empirical experiments. Thus, one of the conditions for the possibility of empiricist foundationalism was according to Arendt the mathematization of nature.<sup>19</sup> Without the abstract and experience-independent, symbolic language of algebra, Newtonian physics for example could not have been possible.<sup>20</sup>

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15 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2: *Willing*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981(1978), 55.

16 Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 172; Jacques Taminiaux, *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997(1992), 125.

17 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 12.

18 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 258–259.

19 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 268.

20 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 265.



According to Arendt, Galileo's, Descartes', and Hobbes' fascination with pure mathematics distorted the distinction between the types of knowledge that pure mathematics and applied mathematics deal with. Because of this distortion, formal, exact systems could be used for measuring all types of natural phenomena, including human behavior.<sup>21</sup> Arendt argues that what was forgotten in the early modern process of the mathematization of nature was the fact that originally, knowledge of mathematical objects was discovered through the practice of measurement and the bodily apprehension of three-dimensional space.<sup>22</sup>

Arendt's own position regarding the ontology of mathematics is difficult to clarify, since both in *The Human Condition* and in *The Life of the Mind* she presents a critique of the mathematization of nature but offers only scattered remarks on an alternative view. Also, when discussing the philosophy and ontology of mathematics, Arendt is at times careless with her use of language. Thus she occasionally gives the impression that she is promoting some form of psychologism regarding the nature of mathematical knowledge.<sup>23</sup> However, if her critique of the mathematization of nature is read in line with her general, holistic, and pragmatic conception of language, in my view it seems more plausible that Arendt's own conception would come closer to some form of realist structuralism in the philosophy of mathematics. In this way, mathematical objects such as numbers would not be conceived as existing as objects, but only as positions or places within a structure or a pattern. According to such a view, the way we come to know about mathematical objects, such as numbers, is through the apprehension of patterns, shapes, and series.<sup>24</sup> Mathematics is simply the language we use for describing simple and more complex structures.<sup>25</sup> What this means is the following: the way we conceive the reality to be divided into structures, patterns, and objects is highly dependent on our linguistic capacities, such as the capability to understand and use mathematical deduction

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21 Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 55–56; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 45, 266.

22 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 266–267. Arendt's argumentation resembles Husserl's view of the history of modern science, presented in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971, see especially §§8-9, §§10-13. However, the conclusions that Arendt and Husserl draw from the "mathematization of nature" differ in several important ways. For example, Arendt does not see the teleological process of the history of philosophy as a preparation for the transcendental reduction, as Husserl does. The interpretational influence underlying both Husserl's and Arendt's conception of the history of modern science is Alexandre Koyré's work on the subject. Koyré was Husserl's student and Arendt's good friend. In their work, both Husserl and Arendt thank Koyré for his insightful remarks on the rise of modern science. Arendt draws her interpretation of the history of modern science also from the works of Werner Heisenberg and A. N. Whitehead, both of whom she quotes frequently.

23 See especially Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 266–267; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 60.

24 See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 267.

25 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1958/1964, 1–2, 18–19. In contemporary philosophy of mathematics this type of mathematical structuralism has been developed by Stewart Shapiro and Michael Resnik among others. See Stewart Shapiro, *Philosophy of Mathematics, Structure and Ontology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, 112–116; Michael D. Resnik, "Mathematics as a Science of Patterns: Epistemology." *Nous*, No 16, 1982, 95–105.

and inference. Read in this way Arendt avoids both the problematic position of empiricism and Platonism in the philosophy of mathematics.

The reason why Arendt regards Galileo and Descartes as revolutionary philosophers is due to their way of developing and changing the Greek conception of geometry. In the writing of Descartes and Galileo, the original practice of measuring land and three-dimensional space becomes a highly abstract and technical enterprise.<sup>26</sup> In agreement with Descartes' own conception of the difficulties in the applicability of abstract branches of mathematics, Arendt remarks that the highly abstract and technical algebra no longer reflects the sensible world. This is because algebraic space is a technical construction, which is possible due to the rules of algebraic equations and the discovery of non-Euclidean space. However, as Descartes himself foresaw, this type of pure mathematics deals with a different type of knowledge than knowledge gained through perception and sense-experience.<sup>27</sup> For example the perception of space and motion cannot be reduced to mathematical terms without a significant change in meaning.

This does of course not mean that Arendt would consider mathematical methods as completely insufficient for use in the natural sciences. Her point is rather that within the modern physicalistic conception of reality, everyday perception and sensation are conceived as "mere appearance" in contrast to the way things "really" are. This is one example of a significant change in the meaning of the terms "reality" and "real." Arendt takes as her primary example Galileo's conception of grounding knowledge in experience. Galileo's famous distinction between "primary" and "secondary qualities of sensation" can be seen as an attempt to answer the problem of skepticism that rises within empiricist foundationalism. Galileo's distinction makes it possible to regard the entire reality as an object for applied mathematics, and pure mathematics as the language through which the objective reality is constructed. Yet, as is the case with most forms of Platonism, the epistemic relationship between these two realms remains unresolved.<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen above, according to Arendt, there occurs an important shift in the attitude towards reality with the birth of Renaissance and the natural sciences. With the development of new instruments, such as the invention of the telescope and various other mechanical machines, philosophers and scientists lost trust in the accuracy of knowledge gained through "naked" sense perception.<sup>29</sup> The so called "secondary sensory qualities" were now conceived as secondary to the so

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26 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 264–266, 287.

27 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 265, 285.

28 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 283; Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 56.

29 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 274; Dana Villa, *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 190.



called “primary sensory qualities.” In fact, we can see, according to Arendt, that the distinction itself is superficial, since it presupposes an objective viewpoint from which human beings can evaluate how things really are in themselves, independent of our scientific practices.<sup>30</sup> Thus she states:

The scientists in their search for “true reality” lost confidence in the world of “mere” appearance, in the phenomena as they reveal themselves of their own accord to the human senses and reason [...] The trouble is only that the discovery of the “true reality” behind the mere appearances remains bound to a world of appearance; he [man] cannot “think” in terms of what he now conceives as reality, he cannot communicate in language about it, and his own life remains bound to a time concept that demonstrably does not belong to “true reality” but [...] mere appearance.<sup>31</sup>

When the whole nature is regarded as an object for applied mathematics, the difference between various ways of justifying knowledge becomes unclear. At the same time, the ancient distinction between mere belief (*doxa*) and true knowledge (*episteme*) appears in a new form. This is because according to empiricist foundationalism, true knowledge is conceived as empirically verifiable, empirically grounded beliefs.<sup>32</sup> However, if these types of beliefs are to be scientifically verifiable, they must be factual truths.<sup>33</sup> Empiricist foundationalism thus needs to somehow explain the connection between empirical knowledge and non-empirical knowledge, such as the laws and truths of mathematics. If knowledge is divided into *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, the question still remains, namely, what is the relationship between these types of knowledge and by what means are these types of knowledge gained without the hypostazising of a supra-empirical realm of mathematical objects? The positivist distinction between analytic and synthetic statements merely pushes the question further. The question of verification still remains and thus, according to Arendt, modern, empirical science becomes a never-ending, self-correcting process that never reaches its own ideal of truth.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as we have seen above, empirical foundationalism claims to be able to ground knowledge in empirical experience.

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30 More recently, a similar argument has been presented also by Hilary Putnam in his article “Pragmatic realism.” In Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *Metaphysics: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999(1987), 591–606. Arendt and Putnam are in agreement about the general pragmatist view that human beings participate in the constitution of a meaningful world through action and the use of language. Also, both Arendt and Putnam can be said to be externalists regarding their conception of the status of linguistic meaning.

31 Hannah Arendt, “The Archimedean Point.” A lecture at the College of Engineers, University of Michigan. *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress, Series: Speeches and Writings File, 1923–1975*, 1968, 7.

32 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 55.

33 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 61.

34 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 54–55.

## The Forgetting of Language in Rationalist Foundationalism

According to Arendt, rationalism attempts to answer the epistemological problems faced by empiricism. The problem of justification that empiricism faces, may naturally awaken a skeptical response. Whereas empiricist foundationalism attempts to ground knowledge in experience, rationalism, such as Cartesian foundationalism, attempts to answer skepticism by means of establishing a philosophy based on absolutely indubitable foundations.

One of the most discussed problems of Cartesian foundationalism is the methodological starting point in the first-person perspective. This problem is something that also Arendt discusses broadly in her writings. Due to the starting point of inquiry, Descartes' meditational philosophy and later, transcendental phenomenology, promote a first-person authority view on knowledge. In contrast to empiricism, this position claims rigorous knowledge to be something essentially rooted in the first-person perspective of conscious experience. The apparent plausibility of the view comes from the fact that we seem to have a special kind of certainty concerning beliefs regarding our own subjective experiences, compared to beliefs concerning for example physical objects. Our own thoughts and emotions seem intimate and immediately present to our consciousness when compared to external objects. It is for example common that we mistake a shadow for a person, but we do not confuse the experience of having a headache with the experience of being astonished. Our *inner* states thus seem accessible to us in a completely different way than the *external*, empirical phenomena.

It is also self-evident that we cannot experience other people's thoughts or feelings the way we experience our own mental states. We do not hear other people's thought-patterns or experience their head ache. In fact, through the use of various thought experiments, we seem to be able to doubt or bracket even the existence of other conscious beings. Thus there seems to be a deep asymmetry between the first-person and the third-person perspective. It is easy to draw the conclusion that if knowledge is to be grounded on an indubitable basis, then it must be grounded in the first-person perspective or the first-person plural. In the history of Western philosophy from Descartes onward this step is common. Philosophical conceptions such as the "ego," the "subject," the "metaphysical We," the "transcendental ego," and "transcendental subjectivity" all share the epistemological first-person view on various theoretical levels. According to Arendt, the problem here is not the emphasis on the importance of subjectivity as such, nor is it even the claim for a transcendental unity of the structures of consciousness. Instead, for Arendt the problem is that the function that some philosophers, such as Descartes, Hegel, and Husserl attribute to the subject or the categories and structures of consciousness, in terms of beliefs and knowledge about the world

and others, may lead to very difficult philosophical positions.<sup>35</sup> One of the most difficult problems of the first-person authority view on knowledge is to explain the role of language in knowledge-formation. This is because language seems to be something essentially social and something that resists any reduction to a pure first-person perspective.

Arendt points out that although perception is indeed our most important access to the “external” world, perception is not always accurate. Illusion and error is part and parcel of perception. To put it in Arendt’s words: “[e]rror is the price we pay for truth.”<sup>36</sup> For example a perceived object is always apprehended by means of various aspects and points of view.<sup>37</sup> In a similar way, more complex knowledge-formation – such as the formation of objective beliefs – is dependent on the capability to use a conceptual language and evaluate the testimony of others who perceive like me. It is here that the significance of language enters Arendt’s late philosophy in a novel way. Throughout *The Life of The Mind* Arendt tries to articulate how the indeterminacy of perception and the intertwining of the “subjective” and “objective” aspects of knowledge are also reflected in our common use of language, since language is an essential part of our form of life.

Arendt’s main argument against rationalist foundationalism is precisely that the world’s existence cannot be properly doubted or bracketed because language, by means of which we think, functions as the unbreakable bridge between the contemplating mind and the world.<sup>38</sup> Thus Arendt claims:

Descartes’ *Cogito me cogitare ergo sum* is a non sequitur for the simple reason that this *res cogitans* never appears at all unless its cogitations are made manifest in sounding-out or written-down speech, which is already meant for and presupposes auditors and readers as its recipients.<sup>39</sup>

In other words, the withdrawal to the subjective realm of reflective consciousness presupposes the existence of a community of speakers who share a common world and a common linguistic system as a reference point of thought. Arendt claims that reflection takes its bearings from the visible world of perception and apprehends the structures of consciousness by means of conceptual thought. Resembling Jürgen Habermas, Arendt points out that thinking is always already intertwined with language. The intentional bond between the philosopher and the

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35 Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy,” 165–166; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 46–47, 89–91, 156–157.

36 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 38.

37 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 38.

38 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 102, 110.

39 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 20.

world can never be interrupted by means of a rational method because language binds thought and the world.<sup>40</sup>

However, according to Arendt, we cannot really answer the question whether language presupposes thought or whether thought presupposes language.<sup>41</sup> The two are inseparable, as I have shown above. Arendt quotes the preface of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Signs*: "Thought without speech is inconceivable; 'thought and speech anticipate one another. They continually take one another's place'; they actually take each other for granted."<sup>42</sup> Whenever we want to describe perception, an experience, or a train of thought, we need to rely on some form of a language or system of signs. This can be sign language, speech, or written text, but the criterion is that the language is constructed through a set of common rules of use for that particular language. Arendt admits that we might feel that we cannot adequately express our most personal experiences or complex thoughts properly in any type of language, since the experience of thinking is very different from for example the experience of perceiving something or doing something practical. It may appear as if something essential to the experience or thinking disappears the moment it is brought into language. Thus Arendt asks: "Was it not precisely the discrepancy between words, the medium in which we think, and the world of appearances, the medium in which we live, that lead to philosophy and metaphysics in the first place?"<sup>43</sup> Further in the first book of *The Life of the Mind* she states: "[t]he words are part and parcel of our everyday speech, and still we can give no account of them; when we try to define them, they get slippery; when we talk about their meaning, nothing stays put anymore, everything begins to move."<sup>44</sup> Arendt claims that the experience of a discrepancy does not imply that thinking or the subjective experiences are prior to or more authentic than speech and symbolic language. This is because we cannot achieve a neutral point outside language from which we could evaluate which is prior to the other, thought to language or the other way around. Linguistic concepts are adopted through learning to use flexible, historical language-systems. Thus, according to Arendt, meaning cannot be understood as an ideal, omnitemporal set of objects that have a similar existence as mathematical objects have according to Platonic realism. Instead, the meaning of a word arises

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40 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 110; see also Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2003, 216.

41 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 98–99.

42 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 32; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964(1960), 17.

43 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 8.

44 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 170.

through its use in a sentence, in a particular natural language.<sup>45</sup> What is important to note, is that meaning does not exist prior to the use of some form of a system of signs, for example speech or complex body language.

This is also the reason why there cannot be an authentic, transparent relation between consciousness (*nous*), the phenomenal world (*phainomena*), and language (*logos*). The relationship between thought and perception, between the mental and the physical realm, is always a relation of carrying over information by means of “metaphorical” language.<sup>46</sup> This is because linguistic concepts are constituted by a historical community of speakers and agents. Even though reflection necessary “withdraws” from the world of appearances in order to be able to focus on mental phenomena and the structures of consciousness, the concepts of thought are necessarily borrowed from a common language.

Language, the only medium through which mental activities can be manifest not only to the outside world but to the mental ego itself, is by no means as evidently adequate for the thinking activity as vision is for its business of seeing. No language has a ready-made vocabulary for the needs of mental activity; they all borrow their vocabulary from words originally meant to correspond either to sense experience or to other experiences of ordinary life.<sup>47</sup>

The speech of the public, common world does not make speech less authentic than philosophical conceptual speech. In fact, the speech of the public world, together with body language, is the most original form of language that we know of.<sup>48</sup> According to Arendt, the human form of praxis, which she calls “action,” and meaningful speech are the forms in which the person of a human being, “the who,” is disclosed.<sup>49</sup> This is why Arendt, in line with philosophers such as J. L. Austin, can consider even a gesture expressive. It is a form of praxis.

[H]uman plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings. Speech and action [*praxis*] reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each

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45 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 171–175. Arendt often uses as her example the word “house”. The meaning of the word is constituted through our form of life, namely, a house is characterized by someone living in it, dwelling in it and perhaps having it as a home. See for example Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 170–171.

46 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 102–103; Julia Honkasalo, “Praxis, Logos and Theoria – The Threefold Structure of the Human Condition.” *Topos*, No 2(19), 2008, 169–180.

47 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 102.

48 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175–181.

49 Dana Villa, *Public Freedom*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008, 306.

other, not indeed as physical objects but qua *men*.<sup>50</sup> [...] With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance.<sup>51</sup>

Arendt respects the importance of philosophical, even meditative thinking, but she claims that the task of philosophical thinking cannot be the reaching of a final, absolute truth by means of intuition.<sup>52</sup> Rather, truth is according to Arendt something that can only be defined within a language, in relation to a context. In other words, the definition of “truth” is dependent on our linguistic conventions.<sup>53</sup> It is far easier to verify a sentence in the field of formal logic or mathematics than to say which statement is true or false in for example the context of moral philosophy.<sup>54</sup> Our moral norms and codes are flexible, contingent, historically and culturally changing. The diversity of various perspectives and aspects is according to Arendt that which makes discursive thought and philosophy itself possible in the first place. Without the capability of discursive thought, there would be no such thing as philosophy. No matter what type of an etymological deconstruction, it will not be able to penetrate the layer of language and arrive at an original, fixed, and authentic meaning of words. It is this ongoing insistence on contingency in Arendt’s writings that separates her in a significant way from Heidegger.

Existence itself is, by its very nature, never isolated. It exists only in communication and in awareness of others’ existence. Our fellow men are not (as in Heidegger) an element of existence that is structurally necessary but at the same time an impediment to the Being of Self. Just the contrary: Existence can develop only in the shared life of human beings inhabiting a world common to them all. In the concept of communication lies a concept of humanity new in its approach, though not yet fully developed, that postulates communication as the premise for the existence of man. Within “all-encompassing” Being in any case, human beings live and act with each other; and in doing so, they neither pursue the phantom of Self nor live in arrogant illusion that they constitute Being itself.<sup>55</sup>

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50 Arendt commonly uses the word “man” to denote human beings in general. It is her translation of the German word *Mensch* and is not gender specific as in man (*Mann*). Jeremy Kohn, “Evil and Plurality: Arendt Way to the Life of the Mind I.” In Larry May and Jerome Kohn (eds.), *Hannah Arendt – 25 Years Later*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1996, 174 n. 2. The reason why Arendt has added italics here is that she stresses the existence of man as always plural, as men.

51 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178. Italics original.

52 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 121–122.

53 Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, 212.

54 Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics.” In *Crises of the Republic*. New York: Harvest Books, 1972; John S. Nelson, “Politics and Truth – Arendt’s Problematic.” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1978, 278.

55 Arendt, “What is Existential Philosophy,” 186.



The task of thinking is according to Arendt to aim for an understanding of things in order to make the world meaningful.<sup>56</sup> It is not surprising that Arendt regards Socrates as her ideal thinker, since according to her, the aim of Socrates' dialectic method is precisely to reach a common understanding (*doxa*) of a chosen topic. Discursive thought that borrows its concepts from an intersubjective community cannot reach absolute truths. It can however, accomplish an agreement. According to Arendt, this is why most of Socrates' reflections remain unresolved, they end in *aporia*.<sup>57</sup> The reason for this is that philosophical problems cannot be solved in a similar way as for example Euclidean geometrical problems, where the answer is always deducible from a finite set of axioms. The fact that the intersubjective, language-using community consists of a plurality of unique individuals makes language flexible and changing. Arendt further holds that we cannot attain an absolute truth of the whole reality, only particular, context-dependent truths.<sup>58</sup>

Being itself is not knowable; it can be experienced only as something "all-encompassing." This makes superfluous the ancient ontological search, which so to speak, kept a lookout in beings hoping to find Being, as if Being were a magical, omnipresent substance that makes present everything that is and that is manifest in the little word "is."<sup>59</sup>

## Trust as the Basis of Meaningful Discourse

Since meaningful discourse is dependent on our linguistic conventions and common rules of language-use, a meaningful language is possible due to a prior trust in the rationality and honesty of other persons.<sup>60</sup> This trust is something that we actually take for granted in our daily action and use of language. In Arendt's own words:

Speaking is one form of action. That is one venture. The other is: we start something. We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes out of it, we never know. [...] And now I would say that this venture is only possible when there is trust in people. A trust – which is difficult to formulate but fundamental – in what is human in all people. Otherwise such a venture could not be made.<sup>61</sup>

Arendt's conception of trust comes here close to the pragmatism of Jürgen Habermas as well as Donald Davidson's notion of "the principle of charity." According to Davidson, rational communication would not even be possible unless we always

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56 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 15.

57 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 169.

58 Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics." *Social Research*, vol. 57, no. 1, 1990, 2–6.

59 Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy," 186.

60 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 175.

61 Arendt, "What Remains? Language Remains: A Conversation with Günter Gaus." In Jerome Kohn (ed.), *Essays in Understanding*. New York: Schocken Books, 1994, 23.

already attributed consciousness to other people.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, in communication we always already attribute properties to the other from our own perspective. An understanding of the others' intentions and thoughts would not even be possible without this type of radical interpretation.<sup>63</sup> Despite significant differences in their argumentation, Arendt, Davidson, and Habermas all hold that the possibility of thinking requires several subjects who share a common world as the context of their language. This is also the starting point for their philosophical inquiry.

What this means for skepticism is that we can never know with absolute certainty that the other person is being true. In our human form of life we simply trust that the person is saying what she means and means what she says. Like the always present possibility of erroneous perception, so is there as well an always present possibility that the other person is lying. In other words, error and illusion are constitutive of what it is to be a human being. According to Arendt, due to our temporal structure of life, even our self-awareness is never transparent or complete. For example, I have a past, which is not accessible to me in the same manner as my present mental states.<sup>64</sup> However, this does not imply that we could never form accurate knowledge concerning the world and other persons. Interestingly, Arendt's conception of language-use and trust is in important ways also close to the conception of "belief" (*Glaube*) in Wittgenstein's late philosophy, which Arendt had read. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, *On Certainty* and *Zettel*, Wittgenstein develops a notion of trust, which forms the basic, pragmatic basis of language-games.<sup>65</sup> What this means is that our basic, pragmatic beliefs frame our ways of responding to other human beings as conscious beings like us. This pragmatic trust is the condition for the possibility of communication and the formation of a meaningful language both for Arendt as well as Wittgenstein. However, the meaning of expressions is always conventional, since the way we interpret various expressions vary culturally. Despite this, the attitude of spontaneous trust seems to be a universal characteristic of the human condition. The Cartesian ideal of gaining absolute certainty remains an unachievable utopia precisely due to the fact that it is the indeterminacy and contingency inherent in the human form of life that makes us request for certainty and security in the first place.<sup>66</sup>

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62 Donald Davidson, "The Conditions of Thought." In J. Brandl and W. Gombocz (eds.), *The Mind of Donald Davidson*. Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1989, 193–200. See also Jürgen Habermas, "Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn." In Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 44–49.

63 Davidson, "The Conditions of Thought," 198–199.

64 Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 1, 203; Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, vol. 2, 12–13.

65 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text with a Revised English Translation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004(1953), § 420; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty – Über Gewissheit*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1974(1969), §§ 94, 115, 257; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981(1967), §§ 481–483.

66 Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.

## Conclusions

In various texts, Arendt writes about empiricist and rationalist foundationalism as two sides of the same coin and claims that knowledge cannot be grounded on a set of indubitable or foundational beliefs. This does not mean that knowledge gained through empirical sciences is implausible or that we could not receive accurate information of our mental capacities by means of reflection and introspection. Rather, Arendt is critical of the general project of finding a set of basic, non-inferential beliefs that would ground other types of belief. This is because according to her, our way of justifying beliefs is context dependent. Furthermore, the quest for knowledge and the quest for meaningfulness are not to be confused with each other. Some basic forms of knowledge simply cannot be proven beyond doubt because these types of belief-systems function as the pragmatic framework for our sense of reality and thus for gaining knowledge in the first place. The focus of Arendt's critique against epistemological foundationalism is the conception of certainty modeled according to the exact, mathematical sciences and the division of knowledge into "true knowledge" (*episteme*) and "mere belief" (*doxa*). Her critique culminates in the neglect of the role that language plays in knowledge formation. Thus, by examining Arendt's twofold critique of foundationalism, it can be seen that questions related to knowledge formation lead her to explore language in novel ways. Whereas in her early writings Arendt focuses mainly on political foundationalism and its totalitarian consequences, in her later writings, such as *The Human Condition* and *The Life of The Mind*, we see how Arendt works out the theoretical roots underpinning the hierarchical distinction between the practical (*Vita Activa*) and the philosophical (*Vita Contemplativa*), which is one of the reasons that make the logic of totalitarian ideologies seemingly plausible in the first place. Since for Arendt philosophy can no longer be held as the "queen of the sciences" that dictates how other sciences should proceed methodologically, we should according to her see philosophy instead as a form of critical practice that makes us see that our scientific truths as well as moral doctrines are contingent, open to critical debate, and thus, most importantly, *fallibilistic*. Perhaps it is partly due to these insights that despite her vast philosophical analyses, Arendt always referred to herself as a "political *thinker*," not a philosopher.

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